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Manila to Managua

Queen Victoria so much represented her time that it came to be called the Victorian Era. For different reasons, the same is true of Napoleon and, in Russia, Stalin. Let me propose a man who better than anyone else represents our time: Sen. Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.). We live you can call it living) in the Laxalt era.

Only in an era of inflated rhetoric (freedom fighters, moral equals of the Founding Fathers) could Laxalt be praised as a great statesman for advising Ferdinand Marcos to step down. At the time, the Philippines army was in revolt, several hundred thousand people were in the streets, the world had just witnessed the stealing of an election, and the Catholic church had asked its nuns to interpose themselves between mutinous army officers and Marcos' tanks.

What did Laxalt do under such circumstances? Did he suggest to Marcos that he shoot a few nuns to restore order? He did no such thing. He told Marcos what was clear to every television viewer: It was all over, Ferdi. Laxalt's good judgment takes your breath away.

Laxalt lends his name to our era because he is the personification of the

school of thought that says the United States really had a choice in the Philippines, that it moved early and decisively and that—here comes the really smart part—all the lessons learned in Manila can and ought to be applied to Managua. The two have so much in common. Not only do both cities begin with the letter "M," but most of the people living in them are small (by American standards) and darker-skinned. It's time to move. Wagons, ho!

Historians will note that in the Laxalt era this is what passed for logic. Secretary of State George Shultz, for instance, was quick to apply the lessons of Manila to the situation in Managua. He just couldn't quite say what those lessons are. The opposition in the Philippines, led by the remarkable Corazon Aquino, was popularly based and—as anyone with a TV set could see—numerous. It was supported by elements of the military—especially reformist-minded officers—and by the all-important Catholic Church.

The situation in Nicaragua is far different. By the testimony of the numerous administration spokesmen, the so-

called contra movement is going nowhere. Without American aid—covert, overt, lethal, nonlethal—it would wither in no time. Even with a minimum of \$100 million in U.S. aid, that still might happen. The Nicaraguan military by and large still supports the Sandinista regime; the church is critical, but not in open rebellion, and the nation is not ending a second decade of an authoritarian regime, but just beginning its first.

The Laxalt Era would hardly be worth the name if it did not also have a doctrine. It is this: Establish an alternative evil to the regime you are opposing and then ask people to choose. In Angola, the doctrine compels the United States to ally itself with Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement, which itself is both identified with, and beholden to, a racist regime in South Africa. In Nicaragua, the administration has worked the same magic. It has cleverly asked Nicaraguans to choose between an oppressive and incompetent regime on the one hand and the legendary Yankee interventionist on the other. Some have chosen the Sandinistas; some the contras. Most, it seems, have made no choice at all.

Even in the Laxalt Era, to think that Nicaragua can follow where the Philippines has gone takes some imagination. At no time were Filipinos asked to choose between an indigenous regime, as loathsome as it might be, and a foreign power. Aquino, unlike the contras, was not on the American dole, and her movement was not created at CIA headquarters. The United States clearly backed her electoral insurgency, but it could be argued that she is in office today despite—not on account of—the long-term policies of the Reagan administration, which backed Marcos almost to the last minute. Only when reality tapped like a woodpecker on the heads of senior administration officials was the policy reversed.

History does not necessarily subscribe to Commentary, the neoconservative magazine, and its fancy foreign policy doctrines. What works in one country may not work in another. There is a big difference between assisting a revolution in one country and fomenting a counterrevolution in another. Laxalt would be wise not to sit by the phone. The lessons of Manila don't necessarily apply to Managua. Maybe those of Vietnam do.